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# Participant Observation: Enhancing the Impact Measurement in Community Based Participatory Research

Brent Hammer

*University of Alberta*, bhammer@ualberta.ca

Fay Fletcher

*University of Alberta*, fay.fletcher@ualberta.ca

Alicia Hibbert

*University of Alberta*, ahibbert@ualberta.ca

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### Abstract

Participant observation parallels the principles of community based participatory research (CBPR), recognizing that each community should be understood in its own context. Using fieldnotes from the Métis Settlements Life Skills Journey (MSLSJ) program, the authors explore the benefits and challenges of using participant observation in CBPR program evaluation. Participant observation was incorporated in 2014 and 2015 as researchers sought a complementary perspective and context to determine the impact of the program. The authors explore relationships with a large number of stakeholders (children, facilitators, community members, and project staff) and discuss ensuring the participant observer's perspective is not privileged above others.

### Keywords

Cross-Disciplinary Methodology, Mixed-Methods Design, Qualitative Evaluation and Social Policy, Community Based Participatory Research, Participant Observation

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## **Participant Observation: Enhancing the Impact Measurement in Community Based Participatory Research**

Brent Hammer, Fay Fletcher, and Alicia Hibbert  
University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

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*Participant observation parallels the principles of community based participatory research (CBPR), recognizing that each community should be understood in its own context. Using fieldnotes from the Métis Settlements Life Skills Journey (MSLSJ) program, the authors explore the benefits and challenges of using participant observation in CBPR program evaluation. Participant observation was incorporated in 2014 and 2015 as researchers sought a complementary perspective and context to determine the impact of the program. The authors explore relationships with a large number of stakeholders (children, facilitators, community members, and project staff) and discuss ensuring the participant observer's perspective is not privileged above others. Keywords: Cross-Disciplinary Methodology, Mixed-Methods Design, Qualitative Evaluation and Social Policy, Community Based Participatory Research, Participant Observation*

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As the first day of camp was wrapping up and campers were enjoying their afternoon snack, it was pretty clear to me that most of the campers already knew each other, either from school or because they were related through family, and that I<sup>1</sup> was an "outsider," neither a member of their family or community, nor a school mate. I was at a bit of a disadvantage getting comfortable with the campers but I did enjoy hanging out and starting to get to know them. I thought it was a very good first day at camp, lots of games and activities organized by the camp director and facilitators. I was looking forward to tomorrow and getting to know everyone a bit more and becoming more of an "insider." (Participant observer's fieldnotes, 2014)

This opening passage illustrates the feelings of excitement and trepidation that may be experienced by campers participating in a summer camp program for youth, as well as those that may be experienced by researchers preparing to engage in fieldwork within a new physical and social environment (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This summer camp program was intended to be different from other summer camps from its inception. It was offered as part of a community based participatory research (CBPR) project involving a collaboration between Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement<sup>2</sup> (BLMS) and researchers from the University of Alberta. In response to a provincial government-led request for drug and alcohol prevention programs, the Faculty of Extension and BLMS partnered to develop,

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<sup>1</sup> The "I" referenced in the field note sections refers to Co-author Hammer who was the participant observer for the Life Skills Journey camps in 2014 and 2015.

<sup>2</sup> BLMS is located in north-central Alberta, 167km from the nearest major city. According to the 2011 national census, its population was 492, with 85 children in our summer day camp's age range, and more than 95 individuals in our camp facilitator age range (Statistics Canada, 2012).

deliver, and evaluate the Métis Settlements Life Skills Journey (MSLSJ) program for Métis<sup>3</sup> children and youth centered around resiliency models (Fletcher, Hibbert, Robertson, & Asselin, 2013). Authors Hammer, Fletcher, and Hibbert are members of the Faculty of Extension research team at the University of Alberta. Author Fletcher is an Associate Professor and Associate Dean, Academic and Student Affairs, and the Principal Investigator of the project. Author Hibbert is the Research Project Lead, coordinating both the service delivery and research components. Author Hammer is a PhD candidate and the research coordinator responsible for conducting the participant observation.

CBPR projects employ a variety of research methods and represent a diverse range of interdisciplinary perspectives and expertise (Fletcher, Hammer, & Hibbert, 2014; Horowitz, Robinson, & Seifer, 2009; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 2001; Wang 2006). Participant observation is not prevalent in CBPR (Savage, 2000). While much of the early CBPR projects and literature were driven by medical researchers and health promotion studies (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Wang 1999), there is growing recognition of the importance of considering broader sociocultural factors when investigating community health issues and programs within a CBPR approach (Horowitz, Robinson, & Seifer, 2009).

Taking into consideration the significance of broader sociocultural factors and the social determinants of health, including culture and oppression (Battiste & Henderson, 2012), it was decided to incorporate methodologies that could capture and record potential changes to the social determinants being addressed through the MSLSJ program. Following the first year of summer camp delivery in 2013, project team leaders added participant observation to the program evaluation process for the 2014 and 2015 summer camps. Participant observation is a qualitative research methodology involving active participation in and observation of a defined group of people within a particular physical and social environment (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Robben, 2007). The objective is for the researcher(s) to collect data in a setting while informed by theoretical questions. Participant observation has historically been used to capture the lived experiences of different cultural groups in faraway places, as in Malinowski's research with the Trobriand Islanders in his classic monograph *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). More recently, the methodology has been valued as a way to produce ethnographic accounts focused on specific aspects within a society, such as Morton's *Becoming Tongan: An Ethnography of Childhood* (1996).

This paper explores the use of participant observation as a *complementary* research methodology in CBPR projects. The authors found participant observation was an effective way to: (1) address some of the assumptions made within CBPR and community-partnerships, for example, the assumption that community facilitators were following the training manual, (2) present a complementary perspective towards ongoing discussions and analysis of the project, through the “insider-outsider” role, and (3) to provide added context to the sociocultural milieu at Métis Settlements in Alberta. Excerpts from field notes are woven throughout this article to illustrate the process of including participant observation as a data collection methodology as well as its contribution to our understanding of the impacts of the MSLSJ. The authors’ findings suggest that participant observation is a valuable research methodology to incorporate into CBPR projects to assist in capturing the short term impacts of programs and to aid with predicting/projecting potential long term impacts.

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<sup>3</sup> Métis peoples are primarily descendants of unions between French or Scottish fur traders and First Nations women during the settlement of Canada. Alberta is the only province in Canada with land-based Métis who live in self-governing communities known as Métis Settlements.

### **Participant Observation in CBPR**

During free play time before camp began, I was playing floor hockey with another camper, passing the ball back and forth, getting more creative with our passes, first simply altering our speeds, then changing from forehand to backhand passes, to finally banking the ball off the wall to each other. It was fun and I was impressed with my playing partner's willingness and ability to follow my lead as I changed up our passing routine, with him immediately replicating my patterns. Feeling more comfortable on Day 3 and wanting to fit in and get to know some of the campers better, I said to him, "You're pretty good, do you play ice hockey?" He simply replied, "No, not really." (Participant observer's fieldnotes, 2014)

The passage above illustrates the basic underlying premise of participant observation: in order to learn about and understand a particular sociocultural group within a particular environment, researchers need to participate in their daily activities alongside those group members. Pioneered by early anthropologists and ethnographers (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; McGee & Warms, 2008), participant observation was an attempt to move beyond simple observation from a distance. Participant observation can provide depth and context to observations and help minimize mistaken assumptions routinely made based on observations from a distance (Kuper, 1983) or when researchers rely solely on second-hand information without having the opportunity to contextualize that information (Lavenda & Schultz, 2012).

Participant observation creates a marginal position of simultaneously being an insider and an outsider within the chosen sociocultural group under study. As the above passage illustrates, engaging directly with the campers in play activities is an attempt to gain insider status, and to build trust and rapport with participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Participant observation requires both well-developed research skills and strong interpersonal relations skills (Sluka & Robben, 2007). At the heart of participant observation, as Hortense Powdermaker (1996) described in her classic definition of fieldwork, is the ability to be involved and detached at the same time.

Participant observation, as a methodology for data collection and conducting fieldwork, has been a cornerstone in social sciences research for nearly a century (Guest, 2014) and yet has seldom been reported as being used in CBPR projects and health research (Savage, 2000). The lack of CBPR literature citing participant observation as a research method may be the result of CBPR origins in public health and health care promotion where practitioners and researchers are largely trained in and employ a health sciences framework based on Western biomedical models (Horowitz, Robinson, & Seifer, 2009).

However, as Israel and associates (1998, 2001) suggest, CBPR was pioneered as an approach for actively engaging community members, organizational representatives, and university researchers in all phases of the research process while addressing community health concerns. The increasing awareness and acceptance that health issues are part of the diverse experiences of community members within their social, cultural, economic, and political realms (Hahn & Inhorn, 2009) has led to a shift in considering CBPR as an approach to conducting community-university research rather than simply as a method of conducting health research (Horowitz, Robinson, & Seifer, 2009). CBPR is considered a desirable, responsive, and responsible approach to conducting research programs with Indigenous communities (Brant Castellano, 1993; Fletcher, 2003). This holistic perspective is premised on the belief that positive, effective, and sustainable action will occur when the guiding principles of CBPR encourage an emphasis on flexibility and the use of many different approaches that are socioculturally appropriate to the community.

Furthermore, and in support of our approach, Hojholt and Kousholt (2014) have recently demonstrated that participant observation may be particularly valuable when researching children's communities where knowledge of their social practices from a different perspective may identify opportunities for action. Savage (2000) suggests that by employing participant observation as a methodology, you are "Standing in the shoes of others" (p. 324). This idea of getting as close as possible to your research participants is important to developing a deeper and richer understanding of their experiences. Savage emphasizes that participant observation is more than just "seeing," it should engage all the senses.

Hojholt and Kousholt (2014) suggest this point of getting as close to your research participants as possible by going beyond just "seeing," is particularly salient when studying the social practices of children. They suggest that observations from the sidelines risk separating children's behaviors from their social contexts. Having a participant observer as an insider provides access to knowledge concerning circumstances and possible intentions around specific social actions between the children and between the children and the adults. First year program survey and focus group data was not capturing changes in the children's social actions nor their interpersonal relationships. Thus, we believe that employing participant observation in our project was an appropriate way to enhance our CBPR approach and provide benefits to community and academic stakeholders alike.

### **The Métis Settlements Life Skills Journey**

I was more intrigued than excited when first asked if I wanted to participate in a summer camp program. It had been some time since I last attended a summer camp and the thought of going to a place where kids are playing games outside in the sunshine and having fun was appealing; yet it was made perfectly clear to me that I would be going there to learn something and not just to "hang out" for the summer. The intrigue subsequently lead me to ask myself questions; questions that brought up the usual trepidations when contemplating going off to a summer camp, not just "will the other campers like me?", but "will they make fun of me because I am different from them?" This summer camp would present many differences that I had never experienced before. This summer camp was in a different community from where I lived. It was being held in Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement in Alberta, Canada (Figure 1). I am not from BLMS nor am I Métis. I was encouraged to consider going to camp because it would be a valuable learning experience for everyone. This camp was called the Métis Settlements Life Skills Journey. (Participant observer's fieldnotes, 2014)



*Figure 1.* Entrance sign to Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement, site of the first Life Skills Journey summer camp.

MSLSJ is part of a Métis Settlement CBPR project that builds partnerships and focuses on knowledge exchange between the University and Métis Settlements and amongst Settlement members. The primary goal of MSLSJ is to build individual and community resiliency in a culturally appropriate manner, with the objective of addressing substance misuse and bullying in Métis communities. The long-term intent of the project is to contribute to community well-being for BLMS and other Métis Settlements in Alberta. In the short term, the goal was to implement and evaluate life skills summer camps for youth aged 7-14, over several years.

Team members felt an evaluation element was missing when we discussed the effectiveness of the summer camp program in creating a safe and fun environment in which to integrate play-based learning with life skills content during a day camp program with Métis settlement youth (Fletcher, Salenieks, & Hibbert, 2016). Authors Fletcher, Hammer, and Hibbert (2014) recently reported on their use of regular team member debrief sessions as a novel, effective, and complementary tool for engaging in a CBPR project. It was during one of these early debrief sessions that team members recognized a lack of firsthand observation and insight with regard to the daily experiences of the children and the facilitators in the program.

Although we were collecting data from the first year pilot summer camps through camper and facilitator surveys and focus groups, we recognized that these sources were providing little evidence of change in the campers. The self-reporting from the young campers provided little content and *even less context* for program evaluation. As noted above, we were hearing anecdotal comments about relationships that were developing between the campers or changes in their attitudes and behaviors but these were not being captured through the surveys or focus groups. The camp facilitators, many with little experience working with youth, were largely focused on and often overwhelmed with their task of delivering the learning modules and leading the activities with the young, energetic campers. This made it challenging for them to see, let alone report on, the impacts on children's developmental strengths or resilience that we hoped to document. The information collected from the facilitator focus groups supports the notion that community members participating in CBPR may have difficulties articulating their experiences in a way that university researchers are familiar with based on particular research methodologies (Kerstetter, 2012).

Through this regular debrief process, team members recognized that insight from a qualitative researcher with training and experience in participant observation may provide valuable context to the daily lived experiences of the campers. Perhaps observations could confirm or dispute the impacts we were hearing about through anecdotal stories and answer the question of whether the program was meeting goals and expectations. Incorporating a fieldwork component to the evaluation process, through participant observation, would provide another layer to the data already being collected, bridging theory and practice so as to achieve a balance between the two (Caulfield, 2006; Savage, 2000).

Being CBPR researchers, we were committed to the principles of community-university partnership and collaboration in all phases of the project and to create opportunities for community voices, either from the youth campers, the camp facilitators, or community members, to guide the process from start to finish. Whether delivering and evaluating a community service program or conducting more theoretical research into the process and practices of CBPR, working with, not for, the community remains a priority in CBPR (Wallerstein, Duran, Minkler, & Foley, 2005). We believe that employing participant observation as a complimentary methodology to our CBPR approach strengthens our commitment to those principles and characteristics introduced by seminal CBPR researchers and later refined in the literature (Horowitz, Robinson, & Seifer, 2009; Israel et al., 1998, 2001). Specifically, it can be used to maintain long term partnerships; it is theoretically based



in cultural relativism, the recognition that each community is unique and must be understood in its own context; and it ensures a holistic approach, incorporating co-learning and community participation since participation in community activities is of critical importance to the method.

Having experienced the value in informing our process and documenting our outcomes (Fletcher, Hammer, & Hibbert, 2014), participant observation was made a priority methodology of data collection for year two. A graduate student with qualitative research experience, including participating observation, was hired as an “experienced camper” to attend the Life Skills Journey camp every day. The researcher would participate by sitting at the team tables with the campers, eating snacks and lunch with them, playing games, and engaging in learning module activities with them. Participant observation was further enhanced through the provision of a digital camera to capture and document camp activities<sup>4</sup> (Figure 2), making the participant observer the unofficial camp photographer.



Figure 2. Campers playing “Ship to Shore” game.

In 2014, participant observation was planned for two camps: one for 11-14 year olds and the other for 7-10 year olds, on a daily basis from 10 AM to 3 PM. In total, participant observation was completed 18 out of the 20 camp dates. It was made clear to the camp director, camp facilitators, community administrator, and the youth campers that the participant observer was not a camp facilitator. This clarification was important to establish some boundaries for the insider-outsider role. We did not want the campers to view the participant observer as an adult with authority over them or the camp program, nor did we want the facilitators to perceive the participant observer as a “university expert” there to help them out. Establishing clear boundaries promotes detachment for the participant observer from extraneous, non-relevant, roles and responsibilities. The ability to be involved and detached at the same time is a key component of effective participant observation (Powdermaker, 1996).

In 2015, when the summer Life Skills Journey camps were expanded to include a second set of camps with two more Métis Settlements, participant observation was completed on 33 out of a total of 40 camp dates. As part of the University evaluation team, the participant observer was to attend summer camp daily and learn something *while* hanging out. A small notebook was used to jot down observations and reflections during breaks between learning modules and activities. After camp each day the notes were “fleshed out”

<sup>4</sup> Ethics approval was obtained and individual camper consent was required from the youth’s parent or legal guardian to allow the use of photographs for research or publication purposes.



and expanded into more comprehensive field-notes to be transcribed and sent to the Project Lead for safe storage, future analysis and action planning.

In the next section we illustrate how participant observation contributed insight (using actual fieldnotes) to our program evaluation process: exposing assumptions that were driving service delivery and research decisions and facilitating awareness of complementary perspectives that in turn contributed to our understanding of the context of the everyday experiences of all the program participants. We conclude by describing how the participant observation process initiated extensive discussion that would not have otherwise taken place, around the nature of the project and relationships, decision making processes, service delivery, and research, and led to appropriate actions required of a successful CBPR project.

## Benefits of Participant Observation in a CBPR Project

### Exposing Assumptions

I, like a few other campers, had recognized that the camp director was posting the day's activity schedule on the wall near the team tables for everyone to view (Figure 3). This was good as many campers go over to look at it to see what's coming up. I think it gave them some sense of structure to the day which many seemed to like. (Participant observer's fieldnotes, 2015).

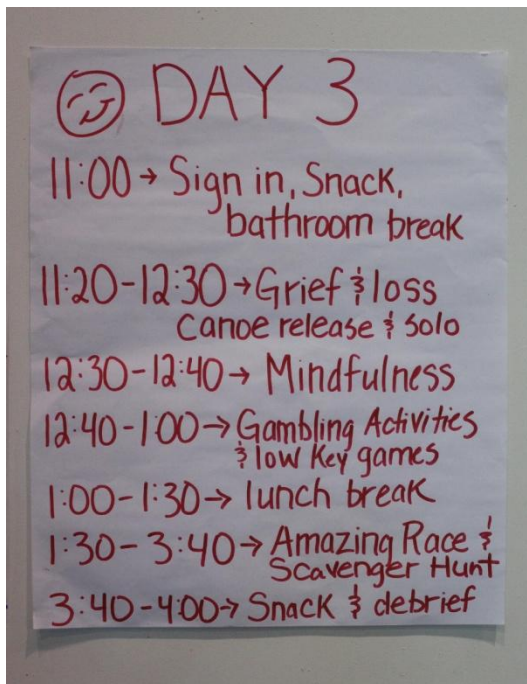


Figure 3. An example of a daily learning and activity schedule to provide structure and consistency for campers and the facilitators.

It was apparent to team members during the implementation of the first summer Life Skills Journey camp that there was some discrepancy between assumptions being made and what was actually happening at camp. For example: it was believed that the facilitators were using the resource manual prepared for the camps, and reviewed during their six week training program, before they engaged in the related activity with the campers: "I would have assumed that as they went through the module, the background information would be talked about before the activity" (Co-Author Fletcher). Current feedback and evidence at that time

was not supporting this position: “It’s not happening that way; so the lesson that we’ve already learned is that we can’t assume that’s suppose to happen or that it will” (Co-Author Fletcher).

Figure 3 illustrates a typical daily schedule of camp activities and learning modules that was posted on the wall each morning before the campers arrived. By incorporating participant observation into the second and third years of summer camp we were able to document, along with the use of photography, what was planned for each day and to verify whether these activities and learning modules occurred, and assess how well they worked or not. Participant observation enabled us to address one of the most basic assumptions concerning what was (or was not) happening at camp. We now did not have to rely on after the fact reporting from internal people, such as the camp facilitators, camp director, and community camp administrator, who all had specific responsibilities to focus on during the day: primarily the campers. The daily schedules along with the subsequent fieldnotes and photographs provided verification that the training manuals developed for the Life Skills Journey program were being used by the facilitators to provide structure, guidelines, and the relevant learning module information to each camp day.

By participating with the campers in free play, games, and group activities, the participant observer was able to verify that the facilitators were making positive connections between the learning modules and the related activities. This provided a sense of what was actually happening at camp. This was something that was lacking during and after the first year’s summer camp and led to many service delivery and research assumptions that were not serving the interests of the Life Skills Journey program, the campers, or the community. Incorporating participant observation into the MSLSJ allowed us to address simple assumptions that are frequently inseparable from knowledge sharing and acquisition (Savage, 2000) in CBPR projects.

### **Complementary Perspective**

It was Day 9 of the 2015 11-14 summer camp at Buffalo Lake and Wellness Fair Day. There were seven booths set up. Camper [Travis] was manning the “alcohol” booth that he helped make earlier in camp. [Travis] enticed each passerby to try the blindfold walk that was meant to simulate being under the influence of alcohol. He was quite successful as almost everyone that he asked gave it a try. Camper [Lacey] was in front of her “play/physical fitness” booth which she designed and made without the input and assistance of any other camper (Figure 4). She appeared very attentive and really “into” her booth. When she was not diligently standing beside her booth she came running back whenever she saw anyone approaching. Camper [Maggie’s] booth on “bullying” was located beside [Lacey’s] booth. [Maggie] had worked on this booth with a partner who was not here today. Both [Maggie] and [Lacey] appeared to be proud of their efforts and positive messages, often offering a slight smile; something that neither of these two did with great frequency during most of camp (only because they are both quiet and shy and not because they did not necessarily enjoy themselves). Overall, a successful Wellness Fair, although the camper participation was much lower than last year and there were a lot fewer parents and community members dropping in. However, last year a lunch was put on for all community members before the Wellness Fair began, but not this year. (Participant observer’s fieldnotes, 2015)

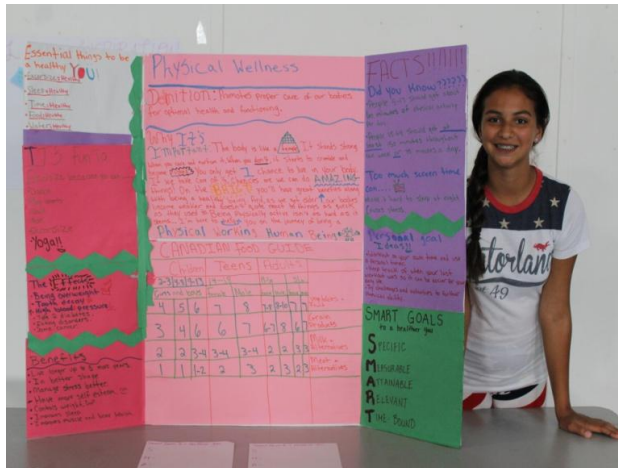


Figure 4. Wellness Fair participant and her “Physical Wellness” booth.

The passage above illustrates a somewhat different perspective on the Wellness Fair than what was suggested by much of the data collected from camper and facilitator focus groups, described below. The Wellness Fair was included in 11 to 14 year old camp as a way to reinforce the life skill learning modules and activities. The campers were to work in groups (or alone) and select one of the learning modules (i.e., self-esteem, bullying, alcohol, etc.) and incorporate what they learned into an information booth with posters and interactive activities and present it to their parents and community members during Wellness Fair Day near the end of camp.

In contrast to the participant observation field-notes suggesting that the campers were engaged with and proud of their booths and their chosen learning modules, data from post-camp camper focus groups was sparse and generic concerning the Wellness Fair. Camper responses to questions about the Wellness Fair included: “liked learning that smoking is bad,” “learned it was not okay to bully,” and “it’s not okay to swear.” While these responses from the campers might suggest that some learning did occur in preparing for the Wellness Fair, they provide little insight into the activity itself or the campers behavior in participating in it.

Another perspective on the Wellness Fair was offered through the facilitators’ end of camp focus group and interviews where the comments were insightful but somewhat in contrast to both those collected through participant observation and from the campers’ focus groups:

I think the health fair stuff, I would probably take out, because they didn’t really care about it. I noticed that when their parents were around they actually did more, probably because they wanted to show them that they were doing something. Even though I thought it was kind of a waste of time because they didn’t really learn anything off it. I know there were maybe eight kids out of the whole group that participated and worked on the things, right. (Facilitator’s post-camp interview, 2014)

Post camp discussions with the facilitators and camp director frequently suggested that working on the Wellness Fair projects, typically held on the second last day of camp, took away time and energy from other camp activities that they felt were more desirable.

Working on the health (Wellness) fair days - it became too focused on those things so we didn’t have time to introduce other games ... something new, to

make it a fun experience rather than just work. (Facilitator's post-camp interview, 2014)

The point here is not to privilege the participant observation perspective over the others but to incorporate it with the other two as a complementary viewpoint that provides a broader perspective and thus greater insight into the behaviors of the campers. Taken together with the data collected from the camper focus groups and the facilitator focus groups and interviews, a more detailed and nuanced picture might suggest that the campers did learn something from the learning modules and activities, that they were proud of their information booths, and that the Wellness Fair was a successful camp activity for connecting and reinforcing Life Skills Journey. There are no doubt challenges to implementing the Wellness Fair into camp, as evident from the facilitators' comments, but the message might be that it was more successful than they thought and with some adjustments it should remain a component of the Life Skills Journey camps moving forward.

### **Providing Context**

It was Day 10, the final day of the 2014 camp for seven to ten year olds at Buffalo Lake. We had just finished eating our lunch and most of the campers were enjoying some free play time. I took this relatively peaceful moment to chat with two of the community facilitators and the camp administrator who were sitting together at one of the team tables. I asked them what they thought about the camp lunches and how these lunches that the campers were receiving would compare to what they might normally get at home for lunch in the summer. Brenda<sup>5</sup> replied that they are probably better than what they would get at home. Janet quickly added "If they get lunch at home." Lois suggested that if this is their only meal of the day it is a good one, and that they probably don't get hot food at lunch. Then she added that these lunches were better than the ones the kids get at school. Then I asked them about the lunches at last year's camp and did they not have problems with those lunches? Janet stated that last year the university had a nutritionist plan the lunches with lots of sandwiches and soups at Buffalo Lake and nobody liked it. Brenda agreed that there were too many sandwiches, including tuna that the kids did not like. (Participant observer's fieldnotes, 2014)

This passage from field-notes illustrates how participant observation can provide context and insight into broader social issues and practices affecting the campers and the community, even when those issues are not directly part of the CBPR project. Food and food choices, while not a focus of the Life Skills Journey summer camp program, have been shown to be an important component towards promoting health for children and their communities (Gottlieb, Vallianatos, & Joshi, 2008; Hammer, Vallianatos, Nykiforuk, & Nieuwendyk, 2015). The conversation arose from observation of the quantity and apparent quality (nutritional value) of the lunches being served to the campers and the amount of waste that was being disposed of into the garbage bins by the campers. The camp cook was a community member hired by the community camp administrator with funding provided by the overall MSLSJ project. For the first year of the Life Skills Journey summer camp, the university team provided a prescribed daily menu prepared by a University of Alberta dietetic student, and provided by an inexperienced camp cook.

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of program participants.

The last section of the above passage reveals that the lunch plan, which community members had approved, did not meet their expectations and was not liked by the campers when retrospectively compared to the following year's offerings. More importantly, the passage provides context and insight to why it did not meet their expectations as there were "too many sandwiches" and a lack of hot food. Despite an assumption made by the university research team and the nutritionist that the primary objective was to provide food that could be easily sourced from nearby grocery stores, the passage suggests that the lunches were not culturally relevant to these campers or this community: many of the community children may not get any lunch at home, they may only get one meal a day at home, or they may not get a hot lunch at home.

Through participant observation we learned more about the daily lives of the campers around food and lunches. This information provides valuable context and insight into the sociocultural milieu of the community and the children around types of food they are used to or prefer and some of the family food dynamics they experience. With this information, further changes were incorporated into the third year of the Life Skills Journey summer camps. This included such changes as plastic plates with designated portion compartments being used for the 7 to 10 age group in an attempt to reduce the amount of food being wasted and to promote a more balanced selection of the foods provided at lunch.

In support of these changes, the camp facilitators took over the serving of lunch foods on to the plates which previously the camp cook performed. The camp cook had experience at preparing and serving meals to adults at oil and gas industry work camps and appeared to have difficulty adjusting his portion sizes down for children. More salads, fresh vegetables, and fruits were also served on the plates by the facilitators rather than leaving them on the serving table for campers to help themselves if they chose. These changes appeared to be working well as suggested by these participant observation fieldnotes (2015): "Lunch – chicken burgers and fries, coleslaw, cantaloupe pieces for dessert. Again, I notice less food wastage" and "Lunch was hot dogs (all eaten up), French fries, caesar salad, watermelon. The watermelon and indeed all fruit seem to be popular." Fresh fruits, when made readily accessible to the campers, were regularly eaten and enjoyed for the most part.

The participant observer's role as an insider provided access to the campers and their daily lunches, sitting with them at their tables and sharing the same food. The insider role also allowed the building of trust and a sense of comfort with his presence among campers and facilitators, which enabled him to engage in casual conversation about the lunches and family food dynamics. At the same time, the outsider role helped to get at a deeper level of information. Because of the detachment necessary for participant observation, there is a lack of personal and emotional connection to potentially sensitive issues, such as food security and family food dynamics.

**Enhancing Additional Qualitative CBPR Research.** While exposing assumptions, providing a complementary perspective, and adding context to overall evaluation of the MSLSJ, we discovered that the participant observation process specifically strengthened all other qualitative data collection methods, including interviews and focus groups. The participant observer, now in the role of interviewer or focus group facilitator among non-community staff, was able to create meaningful questions and prompts around the nature of the project and relationships, decision making processes, service delivery, and research. Incorporating participant observation into our CBPR methodologies also provided a depth of interpretation and analysis that was not as evident in our other data collection methods. In using Nvivo to code and evaluate all collected data, we found the incidence of important thematic nodes of *capacity building* and *change* much higher in the participant observation fieldnotes than in the other data sources. This suggests that it was participant observation that

was most successful at capturing these elements in a language that researchers (particularly coders) understood.

**Post-program interviews.** When not participating directly with the campers in games and activities, the participant observer was able to negotiate between the insider-outsider role and converse directly with camp facilitators, the camp administrator, or other community members that visited camp. This allowed for direct questions to be posed, probed, and discussed regarding immediate camp concerns or broader community issues. The information learned in this context could then be leveraged to make for effective staff interviews, debriefs, and focus groups. Further discussions concerning both the service delivery and the research components were initiated in the post camp interviews with the camp director and the community camp administrator. These interviews were conducted by the participant observer which allowed for immediate follow-up to observations made during camp. It also allowed the participant observer to open up new discussions concerning program delivery and evaluation and identify possible changes for moving forward with the Life Skills Journey program.

**Post-program team debriefs.** Another avenue that resulted in increased discussions were the post-camp debriefs between the participant observer and other evaluation team members. This provided the opportunity to respond to direct questions from team members on both the service delivery and evaluation components of the Life Skills Journey program. It also allowed evaluation team members to explore the personal experiences of the participant observer and how they may provide further insight into the relationship dynamics of all program participants: campers, facilitators, community members, and university team members. It was through one of these conversations initiated by participant observation that helped to identify an area of possible involvement by a broader network: community members beyond the community advisory committee participated in a Year 3 impact and awareness stakeholder focus group. As Co-author Fletcher noted, “Again, this wouldn’t have happened had you not been there.” Information provided through these participant observer debriefs could be compared and contrasted with data collected from surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Insight and context gained from these “regular conversations” (Co-author Fletcher) often led to action steps being taken.

**Surveys and focus groups with children.** Through participant observation it was noted that the two days, usually the first and last, when the university researchers arrived to collect survey and focus group data were very disruptive to the flow of camp. The campers, facilitators, and the camp director were all negatively affected by this disruption. This led to having the community facilitators conduct<sup>6</sup> the end of camp camper focus groups rather than outside university research assistants. One objective of the program was to include community members in data collection and having a participant observer in camp helped to facilitate this. This democratizing of the research is an important component of CBPR (Israel et al., 2001). The inclusion of community members in all phases of the project is a way to empower individuals and build their capacity which would lead to the community taking ownership of the Life Skills Journey camp program and make it sustainable.

**Photographs.** The provisioning of a digital camera, making the participant observer the unofficial camp photographer, was another benefit to our CBPR approach. The schedule photographs (Figure 3) also provide daily historical documentation of how each camp day was planned which may be used for future program development and analysis. The photographs provide documentation to the delivery of the summer camp while providing context of the daily experiences of its participants. The use of photos is a way to show which

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<sup>6</sup> This required a revision to the projects ethics to allow the community facilitators to conduct focus groups with the children that they were working with.



activities and learning modules resonated (or not) with the campers. It was important to continue to negotiate between the insider-outsider role when taking camp photographs, that they represent the view of a camper (Figure 2) and that of a researcher (Figure 3).

A selection of photographs were sent daily during camp to a University team member to be posted on Facebook. This allowed for the campers' parents and community members to follow along and see what was actually happening at camp. All photographs taken during the two years of participant observation were made available to the participating Métis Settlements to use at their own discretion. This is another way to build upon the principles of CBPR by sharing ownership of research material with participating community partners.

Retaining the same participant observer for Year 2 (2014) and Year 3 (2015) of the Life Skills Journey summer camps provided some consistency in terms of data collection and analysis and contributed comparative data from year to year and between the different camps in different communities. The second year of participant observation provided another perspective to how the Life Skills Journey camps were evolving, illustrating how connections were being made between learning modules and activities. Participant observation, although initially incorporated to help collect or document *kid change*, revealed evidence of other changes, i.e., facilitator change, program delivery change, that may not have been captured otherwise. However, incorporating participant observation into a CBPR approach is not without some challenges.

### **Challenges of Participant Observation in a CBPR Project**

The challenges of employing participant observation as a research methodology are well documented, from ethics (Berreman, 1996), to hazards (Howell, 1990), to researcher reflexivity (Rabinow, 1997), to issues of the authoritative voice (Clifford, 1988). The challenges of employing participant observation as a complimentary methodology in CBPR projects are heightened for both the youth campers and the participant observer due to the multi-level nature of the MSLSJ project: combining the service delivery of Life Skills Journey summer camps to Métis Settlement youth with the research objectives of the community and university partners in evaluating the performance of the camps. The stakeholders included: youth campers, community and university camp facilitators, a camp director, a community camp administrator, assorted community members, as well as the university team members. The task for the participant observer was to become an "insider-outsider" within this multi-faceted social environment.

By employing participant observation there is the danger of privileging the researcher's voice, perspective, and data collected over others (Kerstetter, 2012; Savage, 2000). This was mediated in our project by incorporating participant observation with other research methodologies (surveys, focus groups, interviews). In support of the principles of CBPR, we embraced a holistic research approach which acknowledges multiple determinants of the issues being investigated. We believe that incorporating participant observation provided another avenue for the community voice to be heard and shared, that otherwise may not have been expressed or captured. The continuity of being at camp everyday is a way to increase familiarity and build trust, not only with the campers but also the adult community members. Their comfort with the participant observer's presence means they may be more inclined to share their stories and insights about their children, their community and the Life Skills Journey camp program.

Another challenge when employing participant observation in CBPR projects is that it can be a costly and time consuming research methodology where funding and time lines are both usually limited. In our case, one PhD student was employed more than full-time (due to travel to rural locations) for 2 months for data collection alone. The travel budget was quite

high due to traveling back and forth from Edmonton each week, and a need for accommodations near BLMS. Qualitative coding and analysis of the participant observer's fieldnotes further required extensive work by research assistants as just one day's notes was comparable in length to one focus group. Fortunately, the MSLSJ project was able to partner with funders and communities who recognized the value of a multi-level, long term approach to the service delivery and evaluation of the Life Skills Journey summer camp program.

### **Conclusion**

Campers collected their prizes, arts and craft work and said their goodbyes before departing. I said goodbye to Kianna, one of my favorite campers, and she replied "See you next year summer Brent." I helped facilitators clean up before departing. A very successful first camp at Fishing Lake (FL) although the camper numbers were heavily dominated by Elizabeth Settlement, and there was not a lot of community presence in the form of guest speakers. Also, the differences between the more experienced facilitators at Buffalo Lake (BL) compared to the new ones at FL were quite noticeable. BL facilitators were more confident, organized, and knowledgeable of the learning modules. This would be expected, as some of them have two or three years experience with the program, but it does speak to the importance of time and building relationships in communities and with their members. It is very difficult to simply offer a program and expect it to go smoothly and have a positive impact in any given community without having built these relationships. (Participant observer's fieldnotes, 2015)

Participant observation, as a methodology for data collection and conducting fieldwork, has been a cornerstone in social sciences research for nearly a century. In this article we illustrate, through our experiences in the MSLSJ project and the Life Skills Journey summer camp program, how participant observation can make a valuable contribution to service delivery and research projects employing a CBPR approach. Participant observation can expose assumptions, common to CBPR projects, present a complementary perspective to other data sources, provide valuable context and insight that might not otherwise be captured, and strengthen other forms of qualitative methods by informing the design (the questions used) and process (who is asking the questions and when).

We emphasize that participant observation provides a complementary perspective rather than an alternative one in support of the CBPR principle of working together around a common issue. Negotiating between an insider-outsider role requires both well developed research skills and strong interpersonal relations skills. At the heart of participant observation is the ability to be engaged and detached at the same time. It involves being adaptable to a variety of situations and being able to exercise self-restraint. These qualities we deem absolutely necessary in the success of participant observation in the MSLSJ project.

While in no way do we suggest that any or every participant observer has these qualities and will achieve similar results, we do suggest that incorporating participant observation was a worthwhile and valuable endeavor to contribute scientific rigor to our CBPR project. The focus of this paper was to illustrate the process of incorporating participant observation with a CBPR approach, not to report on any particular results of employing the methodology. Further process and program analysis is required and the project is ongoing.

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### Author Note

Brent Hammer is a PhD (ABD) candidate and instructor in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Alberta. He specializes in conducting participant observation and facilitating evaluation data collection and analysis. Brent's research interests include the intersection where people, place, and practice engage to shape cultural identity. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [bhammer@ualberta.ca](mailto:bhammer@ualberta.ca).

Fay Fletcher, Associate Dean in the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta, Canada, has focused on the integration of research and teaching with the intent of making adult education more accessible, relevant, and meaningful for Indigenous learners. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: [fay.fletcher@ualberta.ca](mailto:fay.fletcher@ualberta.ca).

Alicia Hibbert has worked as an applied researcher since 2010 at the University of Alberta, working with First Nations and Métis communities to build resiliency among children and youth. With a background in Anthropology and Humanities Computing, she has an interest in adapting research and knowledge translation methods to the local context to improve program outcomes. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: [ahibbert@ualberta.ca](mailto:ahibbert@ualberta.ca).

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